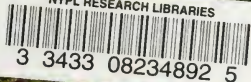


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The Endless Story


AND OTHER ORIENTAL TALES RETOLD

by

Violet Moore Higgins

Story
Time
Tales

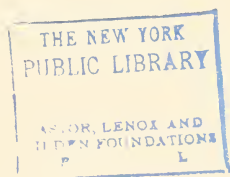




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SEARCHING OLD RECORDS FOR STORIES

The Endless Story

AND OTHER ORIENTAL TALES RETOLD
STORIES AND PICTURES
by

Violet Moore Higgins

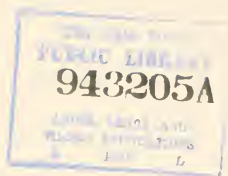
Author of 'The Little Juggler', 'The Lost Giant', etc.



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To My Aunt, Emily
Banks Miller, who
brightened many an
hour of childhood for
me. @ @ V. M. H.

INTRODUCTION



IN those far away lands lying off to the east of us, which we call the Orient, the professional story teller was, and still is, a man of great importance. In the long ago most of the people could not read or write, and even mighty kings who ruled over vast domains, could not so much as inscribe their names or read a word of written speech.

Travel was not so easy and simple a matter then as now, and even rulers found time hanging heavily on their hands. Then it was, when the dull hours came and a king was weary of watching his dancers, or listening to the music of lutes, that the royal story teller would be sent for.

The king would settle himself comfortably on a divan, with his household sitting all about him on floor cushions. Over his head a great fan waved gently to and fro, whenever the little slave boy pulled the cord that held

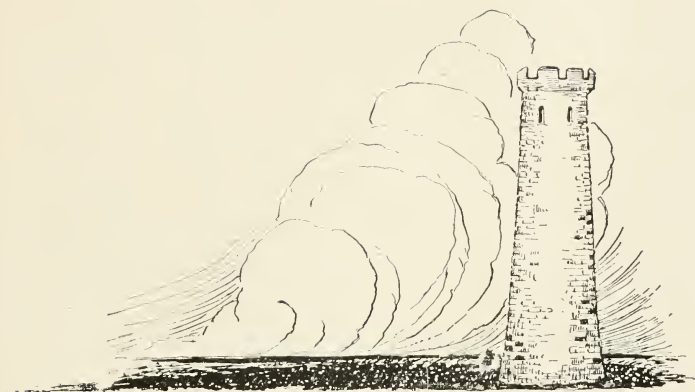
it. Then the story teller would take his place on a cushion at the head of the king's couch, and begin to weave wonder tales that held his audience fascinated to the last word.

But it was not only kings and courts that enjoyed these privileges. Out on the lonesome hills, far from cities and the homes of men, where the shepherds tended their flocks, there, too, was found the story teller. Sometimes he was a traveler, who was passing through the region and stopped for a night at the camp of the herders; more often he was one of their own number, who had seen more of the world than the others, or who had more imagination.

When night had settled down, and they had lighted the watch-fires to keep away the prowling wolves, the shepherds would often form a ring about the warm blaze, and call for a story to while away the dark hours.

Let us imagine that we are sitting on a silken cushion in a king's palace, hearkening to the royal teller of tales, or else that we are stretched at full length on the ground, looking up at the blinking stars, while one of the shepherds begins a tale of the Orient.

V. M. H.



The Endless Story

ONCE upon a time, in the far East, there lived a king so rich and powerful that no one dared oppose his wishes. Now, all went well as long as this ruler's desires were within reason, but there came a day when they were quite otherwise.

The King, Calapha by name, was not

wicked nor cruel, he merely loved good things to eat, rich clothing and jewels to wear, and all sorts of amusements to divert him during his waking hours.

Robed in richest silks and velvets, with a priceless collar of jewels about his neck, he would lie at his ease on a soft divan, propped up among the cushions, nibbling at fruits and sweets of all sorts, while dancing girls circled around him to the music of harps and cymbals.

But there was one form of amusement which pleased King Calapha even more than music or the dance, and that was story telling. He retained at his court half a hundred scholars whose duty it was to search old records for stories, and half a hundred story tellers

whose only business in life was to entertain him with these tales.

The King found the stories so fascinating that presently he gave up almost his entire time to hearing them. While his meals were being served a story teller sat at his side. Another followed him to the royal bedchamber and talked until Calapha fell asleep. Then when daylight came, and the King awoke, the unfinished story was taken up, just where the thread had been dropped the night before.

But there was a cloud over the sun. Every one of the stories had an end.

The King would be very happy over a story, and would lean forward, almost breathless with excitement, his eyes fixed on the speaker's face, listening intently

to every word, when—pshaw—it would come to an end, and he would sink back among his cushions, pouting like a spoiled child because the tale was done.

Finally a bold idea occurred to him—a means of winning his desire. He sent heralds throughout the length and breadth of his kingdom to proclaim that he—King Calapha—would give the hand of his daughter Zaidee in marriage to any man who could tell him a story that would never end. In addition, he would make him heir to the crown-lands and the royal jewels. But there was one condition attached. All those who tried and failed were to have their heads cut off.

Zaidee was very beautiful, and King



HE SENT HERALDS THROUGHOUT HIS KINGDOM

Calapha had wealth untold, therefore it was not long before suitors were thronging the palace gardens, each with a story to tell. Some managed to tell on for a week, a very few continued for a month, one or two even drew their stories out six months, but all the tales came to an end sooner or later, and so, alas, did the lives of the story tellers.

Now, it chanced one day, as the Princess Zaidee was being carried through the streets in a chair borne by four slaves, that her eyes met those of a tall, handsome young man of a serious cast of countenance, who stood in the street before a rug bazaar. As she looked at him the princess knew quite well that, though her father should select a hus-



HERE WAS THE MAN SHE WOULD CHOOSE



band for her, here was the man she would choose were she free to do so.

Without stopping to think it over, she tossed him the red rose that she wore in her girdle, then, blushing furiously, ordered her slaves to hurry on.

But the tall young man had caught the rose and was holding it to his lips, while his eyes followed the beautiful Princess Zaidee.

The next day a new suitor presented himself at court—a tall, dignified young man, who wore in his turban a faded red rose. Zaidee started as she saw him, and secretly sent her maid to warn him of the danger and beg him to give up the undertaking. He merely replied: “I shall win.” He made the same confident answer to all those at court who

tried to dissuade him, and there were many such, for he was a likeable young man.

Then he made terms with the King. He must have eight hours for sleep, an hour for each of his three meals, and an hour for prayers. The other twelve hours would be devoted to story telling.

At last he started his tale.

“Oh great and powerful King,” he began, “once there lived a ruler who was almost as mighty as yourself, but he was greedy and a tyrant. And so desiring to make himself even richer, he seized all the corn in the kingdom and put it into an immense granary, which he caused to be built, and which towered up as high as a mountain. At the end of two years, when the huge

granary was full to the very top, he ordered that the doors and windows be stopped up, and the granary sealed.

“But by some accident the bricklayers had left a very small hole near the top. One day there came a flight of locusts, hundreds and thousands of them, so that the shadow of their wings darkened all the sky, and they tried to get at the corn.

“But the hole was so tiny that only one locust could pass through at a time. So one locust went in and carried off one grain of corn. Soon another locust went in and carried off another grain of corn, and another locust went in and carried off another grain of corn, and another locust went in and carried off another grain of corn—”

And so the story went on for six months. Now it had been in the agreement that the King should not interrupt, but at last he could stand the monotony no longer and he cried out impatiently:

“Yes, yes, I know, but let us suppose that the locusts have eaten their fill and gone. Now let us get on with the story.”

“That is quite impossible, Your Majesty,” said the story teller gravely. “I cannot get to the latter part of the story until I have finished with the locusts.”

The King sighed, but ordered him to continue, and the young man went on:

“And another locust went in and carried off another grain of corn, and

another locust went in and carried off another grain of corn, and another locust went in and carried off another grain of corn," and this went on for six months more, when the King again interrupted, saying:

"How soon do you think the locusts will have emptied the granary?"

"That is difficult to tell, Your Majesty," answered the story teller. "At present they have not cleared a space as great as a man might stand in, and the sky is still darkened with the shadow of their wings."

"Very well, continue," said the King with a sigh, and the suitor went on: "And another locust went in and carried off another grain of corn, and another locust went in and carried off another

grain of corn, and another locust went in and carried—" but suddenly, with a wild cry, the King burst out:

"Enough—enough—take my daughter—take the half of my kingdom—take my jewels—only let me hear no more of those abominable locusts!"

So the fair Zaidee and her lover were married with great pomp and ceremony, and the King thereafter relied greatly on the wisdom of his clever son-in-law. But no one was ever heard to say that he would like to hear the end of the story about the locusts, for the story teller insisted that he could not get any further with the story until the locusts had finished with the corn.

Furthermore, the King was entirely cured of his unreasonable love of stories.

Adabah's Gift

Adabah's Gift

ONCE upon a time, in a certain country in the far East, there came to the throne, at the death of his father, a young man who had the misfortune to have been born blind. Now Adabah, the new King, was a serious young man, who thought much of the welfare of his people, and he entered upon his duties as King with a heavy heart. "For how," he asked himself, "might a blind man know of the many evils that went unpunished in his country?"

He had a lovely young Queen who had

married him for his goodness of heart and whose deepest grief was that her husband might never look upon her face, to see how the light of love shone from her eyes whenever she looked at him.

One day not long after his father's death, the young King sent for Barhma, his oldest and wisest councilor, a man who had grown gray in the service of the former King, and who loved Adabah as if he were his own son.

The old man found his ruler seated on the golden throne of state, his head bowed in his hands.

"Oh my friend," cried the King, recognizing Barhma's footsteps, and stretching out his hands imploringly, "help me—tell me—how can I be King

—I—a blind man? Better I were dead, and a stranger on the throne.”

“Sire,” said the old councilor, “you have something better than sight. You have a kind heart and a desire to help your people. What greater gifts could a King possess?”

“But such gifts are of no avail,” said the young man wearily. “I cannot go about by myself and learn the needs of my subjects. How then can I ever hope to serve them?”

“You can hear, my liege,” said the other gently. The King pondered over that thought for some time, in silence. Suddenly he lifted his head with a radiant smile. He groped for the old man’s hand.

“Yes, I can hear,” he cried, “and

never shall my ears be closed against the voice of my people. Oh, you have helped me, Barhma. You have shown me the way."

He clapped his hands together sharply, and a servant answered his summons.

"Go thou to the tower on yonder battlement," the King commanded, "and cause to be brought hither, unto the very gate of my palace, the great brass temple gong. Chain it there to the wall, with a beater beside it. Then let it be known throughout my realm, even to the length and breadth of my domain, that if anybody has a grievance, or needs help, he has but to sound the gong, and I will hear his story and help him if I can."

When the servant had gone, the old



DAY AFTER DAY THE GONG WAS HEARD

councilor gently laid his hands on Adabah's head in blessing. "God will reward you some day," he said.

The years rolled on. Never a day passed, and indeed scarcely an hour went by between sunrise and sunset, without the gong being heard. And day by day the fame and goodness of the King were spread abroad in the land. Many a man and woman in that realm would willingly have given all he or she possessed if it could have helped to bring sight to the blind King.

Adabah devoted nearly all his time to the demands of his people. He was told by his councilors that the country was growing more and more prosperous and the people happier day by day. No matter how weary he might become he

would let no one be turned from the gates.

One day, as he lay on the couch, enjoying an hour of rest, he said to the Queen who was sitting near him: "Some day there will be no more unhappiness in the kingdom, and the gong will not ring—"

A loud beating on the brass gong interrupted him, and in another moment a soldier came hurrying in.

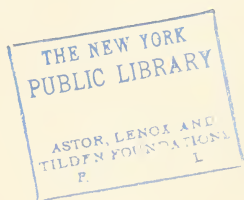
"Sire," he cried, "it is a snake—a big ugly snake ringing the gong with its tail. I shall drive it away of course, but, sire, it is indeed a strange sight."

The Queen shivered. She had lived in fear of snakes since childhood. "Yes, drive it away," she cried involuntarily.

“No,” said the King in a ringing tone of command. “I will deny no creature that rings the gong—let the snake be brought to the audience chamber.”

His order was obeyed, and soon the soldier returned with a great snake wriggling along beside him. The scaly creature coiled itself beside the King, and began to tell its story in the universal tongue of the birds, the beasts, and the reptiles, a language which the King, when a boy, had learned from an old dog who was very fond of him.

“Oh King,” said the snake, “I live in a hole at the foot of a tall cypress tree with my family. When I was away from my home this morning, in search of food, a great animal covered with





THE MISFORTUNE TO HAVE BEEN BLIND

sharp needles killed my babies, all but one, who lay hidden beneath a root. Tomorrow the animal will return, and perhaps he will find my last child and kill it too. Oh King, save my last little one for me."

"I will indeed; you have not asked in vain," answered the King, who had listened with great interest to the story. He immediately ordered the soldiers to drive away the porcupine, the great animal covered with needles, that had killed the snake's family.

When the audience was over, the King lay down to rest, for he was very tired. His blindness was becoming a heavier burden than he could bear. As he lay asleep, alone, on his draped couch, there was a sudden rustle in the room.

Quietly, unobserved by anyone, the snake had slipped back into the palace, and coiled itself beside the sleeping King.

It held something in its mouth—two clear yellow stones that glittered as the light caught them. Gently, so as not to wake him, the snake laid a stone on both of his eyelids.

“The topaz shall pay the King for his great kindness to me and mine,” the snake said, and slipped away.

The King did not sleep long. There seemed to be a weight pressing on his eyelids. Presently he sat up and as he did so, two yellow stones fell into his lap.

But what miracle had happened! There was a curious radiance in the room—

it was all light about him—HE COULD SEE!

As he cried out in his delight, the Queen came running in, frightened by the unusual note in his voice. Others of his court followed her. Great was their rejoicing when they learned their King could see. But suddenly there was a sound of running feet, and in came a soldier, driving the snake before him.

"I caught it slipping out of your room, sire," he cried. "Oh, tell me, has the snake harmed you?"

"It has done me lasting good," Adabah answered, "for I believe it brought these yellow stones that have restored my sight. Did you bring them, and why?" he continued, turning toward the snake.

"Because, oh gracious King," it answered,

“in your great goodness of heart you stooped to help a creature whom all others fear and ill-treat. I wished to show my gratitude, so I brought the healing topaz from a secret place of which none know but myself.”

“Henceforth we shall call the topaz the ‘Stone of Gratitude,’” cried the Queen joyfully, “because of the snake’s gratitude to our King.”

“And because of my greater gratitude to the snake,” concluded Adabah.

The two stones were then set in massive rings, one for the King, and one for the Queen, and they wore them always, in token of their deep gratitude to a poor and humble snake.

The Little Gray Lamb

The Little Gray Lamb

ONCE upon a time, long, long ago, folded safely away in the hills around Bethlehem, a little group of shepherds tended their flocks. By day one could see, dotted about over the rolling hillsides, hundreds of snowy sheep and tiny lambs, and moving here and there amongst them, were the shepherds and their dogs.

All day the flocks grazed on the slopes, up to the fringe of cypress trees that crowned the hilltop. Toward sunset the shepherds, aided by the dogs, began to gather the sheep together, and

to drive them toward a little hollow in the hills, where they would be comparatively safe from the wolves and jackals that roamed about at night.

Then the men would build a bonfire and all but two of them would lie down beside it and sleep. These two, crooks in hand, and with the trusty dogs nearby, would keep guard over the flocks.

The tired sheep, glad to lie down after roaming about and grazing all day, huddled closely together like friendly puppies. The wee lambs, funny wab-bly-legged little creatures, would cuddle up very close to their mothers, and fall asleep, perhaps to dream happy dreams of new grazing grounds.

But there was one little lamb who

was not dreaming, and whose eyes were wide open, staring up into the sky. He lay out at the edge of the flock, a little apart from the others, and away from his own mother. His fleece was a dull and homely gray. Poor little lamb, his mother was ashamed of his appearance, and felt it hard to bear that she, whose fleece was the finest and whitest of the flock, should have a son so ugly to look upon.

All the other sheep, and even the lambs of his own age, turned up their wrinkly noses at the little gray one, and kept away from him, except now and then when he had selected a particularly nice spot for grazing. Then very often, it happened that one of the older ones would come up very close, and, shouldering

him roughly aside, would take his place.

The little gray lamb never protested. He knew he was ugly and gray, and what could such a lamb expect of the world? His fleece was no good to sell—doubtless when he got older the shepherds themselves would kill him and roast him over their fire for supper. Or perhaps a wolf would steal out from among the cypress trees, and, seeing him lying alone, apart from the flock, would carry him off into the dark forest and devour him.

If he were only white! He used to lift his tired little face to the stars and give a faint weary bleat that seemed to mean, “Oh, give me a white fleece.” But though he wished for it day after

day, and night after night, with all his little heart, his wool remained as dark and grimy looking as ever. The wee lamb grew more hopeless with each day that passed.

One night as he lay at the edge of the flock as usual, looking up at the sky and the dark clouds that went scudding across it, there suddenly appeared through a rift in the clouds, a star larger and more brilliant than any he had ever seen before. It grew brighter and brighter as the little lamb watched it, and presently began to drop lower in the sky until it seemed to hang directly over the roofs of Bethlehem.

Then the dogs began to notice the strange light, which was making the fields

as bright as day, and they ran about excitedly, whimpering and barking. The shepherds on guard roused their sleeping companions, and all watched the strange new star, not knowing whether it boded good or evil.

Suddenly on the still night air came a chorus of angel voices, and at that sound, the watching group fell on their knees in awe. "Peace on earth," the angels sang, "good will to men." Then the voices told the joyful tidings of the birth of a King, a Savior and Redeemer long awaited by the people. He had been born in Bethlehem, and would be found wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. Almost before the last notes of the heavenly song had died away, the shepherds were on their way



ALL WATCHED THE STRANGE NEW STAR

toward the town of Bethlehem. Catching up their crooks, and flinging their mantles hastily about them, they rushed away, climbing over rocks and dodging about among the cypress trees, following the guiding light of the star.

The patient sheep, trained to follow wherever their protectors led, arose and hurried after, like dim ghosts in the starlight. At the very end of the flock trailed the ugly gray lamb, afraid to be left behind, yet almost ashamed to go with them. "In the throne-room of a King, where would there be room for a miserable gray lamb?" he asked himself.

A sharp stone caught in one hoof. He bleated piteously, but the shepherds were too far ahead now to hear his

feeble voice or to notice his plight. For a few steps he ran along on three legs, then he stopped and pawed the ground until he loosened the stone and it fell out. But the tender little foot had been cut, and it hurt him sorely, so that he limped now, and gradually he fell behind the others. Still he plodded on, lonely—frightened—utterly miserable.

After what seemed miles to the little gray lamb—so weak and wabbly on his slim little legs—the fields were left behind, and the streets of the town were reached. Far behind in the distance he could see the shepherds and their flocks were entering the courtyard of an inn, and passing on toward the stables. Wearily he followed, almost too tired

now to see that the big bright star hung directly overhead.

He reached the door at last. All the others had passed in, and as he paused on the threshold, he could see the sheep all lying down quietly among the stalls in the big stable. The dogs were at rest too, their heads between their outstretched paws. The shepherds knelt on the rough stone floor just ahead of their flocks.

The little gray lamb tottered forward a step or two on his shaky legs. Now he could see the backs of three men kneeling near the edge of the manger, plainly dressed—a tradesman of some sort, a potter perhaps, or a carpenter, kneeling by a manger—three men who wore crowns, and whose long flowing



LAI D A STONE ON EACH EYELID

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robes were stiff with threads of gold and silver. They were holding their hands, filled with rare offerings, chains of gems, vases of incense and ornaments of carved ivory.

In the manger, sat a young woman, holding a child in her arms. He was a very young Baby, with fair clustering curls that seemed to shine so that they made a soft glow of light in the dark stable. Suddenly the Child caught sight of the little gray lamb, standing quite alone, not far away, swaying a little on his tired lame feet. With a little gurgle of pleasure, He held out His baby arms.

The little gray lamb forgot then, for the first time in all his life, that he WAS gray. With a faint bleat he ran

toward the manger, and lay down, close beside it, and the Baby buried His chubby hands in the soft gray fleece.

At that gentle touch the little gray lamb felt suddenly happy—his lame foot no longer hurt—he was not tired—why—it did not even seem to matter now that he was not white like the rest of the flock.

There was a subdued hum of voices around him, murmurs of amazement. He could hear the voices of the men in the glittering robes—the voice of the man who knelt beside the manger—the mother's voice, soft and sweet—and then the more familiar voices of his own shepherds. Presently the little gray lamb heard them say:

“It turned white.”



HE COULD SEE THREE MEN KNEELING

“Oh—did you see—”

“Just when He touched it—”

Then the little gray lamb felt other hands than the Child's upon him, all touching him gently and reverently. He turned and looked over his shoulder. A smooth hand, covered with rings, lay on his back—no—it could not be on him—for the fleece was white—while his was—he looked down at his breast. It was now pure white. He stared at his legs. They, too, were covered with fleece as white and soft as the snow itself.

Then the little gray lamb bowed his head low before the Holy Child, in token of gratitude for the great blessing that had come to him and made him whiter than all the rest.

The Mice and the Camel

The Mice and the Camel

FAR, far away, deep in the heart of the forest, in a land seldom visited by travelers, there was once upon a time a strange kingdom called Mouseia or the Land of the Mice. All the mice in the world either came from this land, or were the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of mice who had been born in Mouseia.

The mice all lived in neat little homes, quite cozily furnished even down to the last details, such as pictures on the walls and books on the shelves. There were shops and schools, churches

and forts, too, and in the very center of the kingdom there was a capital city with a royal palace. It was tiny but very splendid, and in this wee palace lived King Long Whiskers the First, ruler over all the mice.

Although Mouseia was such a wonderful little country, and so complete in every way, it was cunningly hidden away from the eyes of men, for the buildings were overshadowed by great ferns and concealed behind big boulders, so that it would have taken a very sharp eye to discover even a single house.

Now it happened one day that a caravan, a great train of men and horses and camels, passed through Mouseia and encamped nearby. By great good luck they did not go directly

through the center of the little kingdom, and so the public buildings and most of the houses of Mouseia were undisturbed. Fortunately, too, none of the mice were injured, for they had been warned by the quivering of the earth as the caravan had advanced and so had fled to places of safety. But still many, many little homes were entirely crushed to bits, and the amount of re-building that had to be done was very discouraging to the mice. Then, too, they did not dare begin until the caravan was far away, for there was danger that it might turn back and once more destroy the houses.

Now it chanced that there was a very old camel in the caravan, and he had become sick from overwork and ill treatment. He was blind in one eye,

and he limped a little, too, so that he was no longer of much value. His owner felt sure that the camel was going to die, and so, when the caravan moved on from Mouseia, the unkind man left the poor beast behind without food or water.

But the old camel did not die. A few days of rest and relief from heavy burdens made a big improvement in him, and soon he was able to be up and about. He was ravenously hungry, and began to roam all over Mouseia, tramping down many houses, eating away the ferns which hid the buildings, and chewing up the crops of fine short grass which the mice raised as food for the winter.

The mice were frightened and worried by

this state of things, and began sending complaints to their king. They said that one of the moving mountains had remained and was destroying houses faster than they could rebuild them.

“Furry Ears,” said the King to his prime minister, “this cannot go on. Even if this mountain be a hundred miles high, he must not eat our gardens and trample our homes. Go to him, and say that I command him to appear before me.”

Furry Ears obeyed without delay, and sought out the camel. He described his royal master to him as a creature of such power and importance that the great beast permitted himself to be led by his nose-string to the royal palace. He stepped very carefully as he went,

so as to avoid further displeasing the great unknown King. But when at last he stood in the presence of the little ruler, he began to show both amusement and scorn.

“Poof!” he laughed; “is that wee mite your King? I had thought to face some mighty creature. I would never have come had I known he was such a speck.”

So saying he clumped away, tumbling down more houses and eating more crops.

But King Long Whiskers felt that he and his people would some day be avenged. He was quite right too, for only a few days after that, the camel’s nose-string became entangled in a thorn bush, and

he could not get it free, try as he would. He was forced to stand with his head to the ground, and the cruel thorns jabbed him with every move he made. His plight was soon discovered, and the story brought to the King. Attended by his prime minister and court, King Long Whiskers set out for the thorn bush.

“You see,” he said to the poor prisoner, “you called me a speck, and refused to obey my just commands or even listen to my words, and now you are being punished.”

“You are right, oh mighty King,” the camel answered humbly. “I was in the wrong, and now I am suffering for it. But if you will forgive me, and set me free, I swear by my whiskers and my

double hump, that I will be your faithful servant as long as I shall live."

This speech touched the King, and he ordered a number of his mice to set to work at once freeing the camel. One gnawed away the nose-string, others pulled out the thorns from his nose, and still others held the branches aside, so that he could raise his head.

Once freed, the big beast kept his word. He was so powerful that he could carry burdens which seemed impossible to the little mice, and would have required the services of thousands and tens of thousands of them. He would go wherever they commanded, and lie down patiently, while they loaded him with sticks, stones, straws, and all sorts of building material, climbing up

his hairy back by means of little rope scaling ladders, With his help they were able to build great stone walls all around their kingdom so that they no longer had to fear the attacks of their dreaded enemies, the cats, or their envious neighbors of a nearby country, the rats.

So time went on, and every one in Mouseia was very comfortable and happy. Then one day came a band of woodcutters to the forest where the tiny kingdom lay hidden under the ferns. There was no way to hide the camel, however, and the woodcutters saw the big beast. They threw a rope around his neck, and led him away to their tents, where he was forced to carry wood and water for them.

He tried to kick and bite his captors,

so that they would set him free, but he received such hard blows for his pains that at last he was forced to submit. He thought sadly of his kind little friends, the mice, and always walked very carefully wherever he went for fear he might step on the hidden home of some mouse-farmer who lived outside the walls.

When the King of the Mice heard the bad news he was very angry indeed, and he sent Furry Ears to the woodcutters at once with the message that he wished to see them. Surprised and amused, they followed him to where the little King waited in state, surrounded by his court, in the public square. They listened gravely to his demand that the camel be returned immediately,

but when he had finished speaking, they roared with laughter.

“You silly little mouse!” they said at last, wiping away the tears that their laughter had brought to their eyes. “Did you really think we would give the camel up to you? If you want it, come and get it.”

“I will,” squeaked the Mouse King in a rage. I hereby declare war on you and all the people of your village.”

At that the woodcutters laughed harder than ever, and went away holding their sides, declaring that the Lord Mayor would die of laughter when they told him of the great joke.

But King Long Whiskers was in earnest. He had been defied and in-

sulted, and he was thoroughly angry and determined on revenge. Accordingly, he sent out calls to all his subjects, not only in the kingdom, but in the most distant lands, and they trooped home by thousands and tens of thousands and began marching toward the town of the woodcutters.

By day they hid under leaves and bushes, but as night fell they began work. Tunnel after tunnel was burrowed under the town. First they made their way to the treasury, through floors and by digging under walls, and piece by piece they carried away the public money. Then they began nibbling away the foundations of all the buildings in the town, and carrying off loads of dirt from under each place until at last the

city stood on a mere crust of earth which bridged over a deep black pit.

When the King of the mice and his generals and chief engineers were sure that all was in readiness so that the least shock would destroy the town, they sent a messenger to the camel with a warning. The little mouse ran to where the patient animal lay tied, after a long hard day of toil.

“I shall gnaw through your rope,” he said, “and when it is quite dark you must get up, and steal quietly away to our city. All will be explained to you later.” When the little mouse had chewed through the last strand, he was off like a flash.

In the meantime the King and his prime minister had prepared a letter for

the Mayor of the woodcutters' town, and the mouse-generals had been leading their troops far away from the scene of danger.

The King's own messenger was the last to leave. He scuttled up the gate-post of the Lord Mayor's own house, and dropped King Long Whiskers' letter on the steps, where it would surely be seen the first thing next morning.

That night, when all the little mice were safely back in their homes, they heard a soft thudding on the ground and knew that their friend, the camel, had come back, so they all went out as quietly as possible, to make him welcome.

"No explanations now," the prime minister said. "You shall know all tomor-

row,” and the tired camel, happy to be among his friends once more, settled down comfortably for the night in an open space which had been set aside especially for him, and was known as Camel Park.

Early the next morning the letter was found by the Lord Mayor himself. When he saw that it bore the royal seal of King Long Whiskers the First, he felt that the contents would be a rare joke indeed. Hastily he summoned the town council of fifty, and when they were seated around the great table in the council chamber, prepared to enjoy a great laugh, he broke the seal and opened the envelope.

The letter was very short. The King of the Mice had merely repeated his de-

mand that the camel stolen from him should be returned at once, or he would wage war on the town; but the clever little mouse ruler had slipped a generous quantity of snuff between the pages of the letter.

As the Mayor read the brief message he began to laugh, and waved the letter gayly around his head. His laughter changed, however, into a choking sneeze. The powder floated out into the air, and in an instant the fifty councillors were all sneezing in fifty different ways. Suddenly the hall quivered, then there was a great crunching and crackling and crashing of timbers. In an instant more, the thin crust of earth underneath the building broke through, and almost before it can be told, the Mayor and the

councillors, the town hall and all the neighboring buildings had tumbled down, down out of sight, into the big black hole.

But King Long Whiskers the First, and all his subjects and their friend the camel, lived long and prospered, and never again was the kingdom of Mouseia, in that far off land, troubled by an enemy.







